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America's defense: what price security?

By Brad Knickerbocker
Staff correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

Over the next five years United States defense spending will total nearly \$7,000 for every man, woman, and child in America. It's a buildup in weaponry and warriors that will total a staggering \$1.5 trillion.

To use the Reagan administration's rhetoric, the 1980s will be a "dangerous decade" in which a "window of vulnerability" must be closed and a "margin of safety" constructed.

Judging by public opinion polls, most citizens apparently still favor this "rearm America" effort, although markedly less so than a year ago. But after one year in office, President Reagan also finds himself confronted with serious questions about the economic and political cost, strategic wisdom, and international impact of beefing up the military to this degree.

Here at home, the key issues have to do with "guns vs. butter" and the nation's economy. Domestic programs have been deeply cut. The "social safety net" is seriously rent. The estimated federal deficit bounds upward. Even some of the staunchest Pentagon defenders on Capitol Hill say the military will have to assume a greater share of budget trimming.

A growing number of military reformers among lawmakers of every political stripe as well as defense intellectuals raise doubts about the way money for arms and personnel is to be spent. They are concerned about the continued emphasis on firepower and attrition over maneuverability in tactical planning and preparation. They question the increasing reliance on "gold plated" guns, tanks, and planes that are highly sophisticated but may be too complex when thrown into the heat of battle. They worry about the shift from "leadership" to "management" among the armed services.

As a candidate, Ronald Reagan promised to improve relations with the US allies. But his comments about a limited European nuclear exchange, decision to produce the neutron warhead, actions on Poland, and strong commitment to increased defense spending have made many Europeans anxious.

What does this portend for the administration's desired strategic buildup?

Speaking of this difference among Western allies, NATO Secretary-General Joseph Luns said: "There is no denying the newly reassertive spirit in America, with its emphasis on bold foreign policy initiatives and heavy defense expenditures, finds much popular sentiment in Europe moving in

very different or, in some cases, wholly opposite directions."

To those who fear his military buildup, Mr. Reagan says, "I hope and pray with all my might that the weapons won't be used."

"I also happen to believe that that is the purpose," he said at his most recent press conference. "If military defense is well done, it doesn't have to be used. We've never gotten into a war because we were too strong."

The underlying question, of course, is: Will the United States be more secure five years from now? The President argues that the United States must become relatively stronger before meaningful arms reduction can be negotiated.

Former President Jimmy Carter agreed that US military power needed to be increased. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (which he said had made a "dramatic change in [his] opinion of what the Soviets' ultimate goals are"), he began planning a defense buildup that was only 10 or 15 percent less than what Reagan ultimately proposed.

Such differences on how much should be spent for national security are related to the size and nature of the perceived threat.

In a slick and detailed pamphlet titled "Soviet Military Power," the administration last fall described "the threat to Western strategic interests posed by the growth and power projection of the Soviet armed forces."

"In the past decade," the Pentagon booklet warned, "Moscow's increasing boldness can be linked directly to the growing capabilities and utility of its military forces."

Opinions vary widely about relative US-USSR strength in nuclear and conventional arms and personnel. When the comparisons are broadened to include NATO and Warsaw Pact forces, when the Soviet Union's geographic size and Chinese opponent to the east are taken into account, when the use of Soviet armed forces for some nonmilitary purposes is considered, the West retains the advantage in many key areas.

Still, the Soviet Union over the past two decades has pulled closer to — and in some important areas surpassed — the United States, most analysts agree.

In its most recent annual study, "The Military Balance 1981-1982," the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London reports: "The numerical [conventional forces] balance over the past 20 years has slowly but steadily moved in favor of the East. At the same time the West has largely lost the technological edge which allowed NATO to believe that quality could substitute for numbers. One cannot necessarily conclude from this that NATO would suffer defeat in war, but one can conclude that there has been sufficient danger in the trend to require urgent remedies."

While overall military expenditures are roughly equivalent, the US has a significant technological advantage in its conventional forces.